

# ‘From Segregation to Assimilation’

## A Thematic Study of Policies and Practices Australia (1800 – 1970)

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## **Introduction**

The theme points to a continuous process of intervention and control over Aboriginal peoples lives from the earliest colonial settlements. While formal policies of this kind terminated in the recent past, the legacies of the associated practices remains a part of Aboriginal peoples' stories today.

## **The Histories**

The histories that inform the theme 'From Segregation to Assimilation' are the histories of European intervention in Aboriginal peoples' lives since invasion. As such the theme reflects or parallels all Aboriginal histories from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth century. This comprises a complex history of different peoples, jurisdictions, events and responses.

The intention of the project is to find patterns that reflect common experiences and stories. However, the complexity of the histories and the particularities of certain events first demands a comprehensive understanding of the events, chronology and people effecting Aboriginal people throughout this period. This section therefore attempts to provide a brief history of the events and chronologies relating to colonial and state administration of Aboriginal people.

## **Colonial and State Administration**

There is no neat chronology of events relating to the theme 'From Segregation to Assimilation'. Each jurisdiction developed its own models and practices, and while many ideas were shared across administrations, the implementation of particular practices was not uniform and occurred at different times in different regions. As a starting point, however, this section provides a brief outline of the key events and laws that were implemented in each of the colonies and states.

See McGregor in (Moses 2004) re differences between absorption and assimilation.

## **Protection**

### **Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania)**

The establishment of a penal settlement in Van Diemen's Land in 1803 triggered a violent and protracted conflict between the Aboriginal owners and the newly arrived settlers. The Tasmanian Aborigines waged a war against the invaders and created a high level of fear in the colony. This lasted for more than 30 years, but it was the period known as the 'Black War' which was a time of severe conflict in the 1820s and 1830s that led to an attempt to physically exterminate and remove Aboriginal people from the island. The particular set of events shaped the history of Aboriginal people in Van Diemen's Land and Aboriginal-settler relations in the other Australian colonies.

Colonel George Arthur was Governor of the penal settlement from 1824 to 1836 and during his administration he sought both military and conciliatory solutions to the problem (Haebich 2000, p. 73). In 1828 he proposed the establishment of an Aboriginal reserve on the then remote north-east coast, and declared a state of martial law and approved 'roving parties' to scour the bush for Aboriginal people. Two years later he authorised the infamous 'Back Line'; a large scale, quasi-military operation that sought to cleanse Aboriginal people from the 'settled districts' (Haebich 2000, p. 73). Arthur simultaneously attempted to negotiate a settlement to the Black War in 1830 when he appointed George Augustus Robinson to work with small groups of Aboriginal people to bring in Aboriginal people who remained in the remote west and northwest of the island. From 1830 to 1834 Robinson made six expeditions and was assisted by twenty-seven Aboriginal people who provided cultural and environmental expertise to assist in negotiations with survivors.

By the time martial law was revoked in 1832 the devastation of the Black War was severe on both sides (Haebich 2000, p. 73; Reynolds 1995). But for Aboriginal people the impacts were compounded by disease and starvation and it is estimated that only 400 Aborigines survived by this date. Aboriginal people knew they had to negotiate with Robinson and he in turn entered into a form of treaty with the survivors. Robinson agreed to provide food, clothing and shelter and more significantly assured Aboriginal people that their cultural traditions would be respected and that they could regularly visit their homelands. In 1833 more than two-hundred survivors of the Black War were relocated to Wybalenna on Flinders Island off the northeast coast of Tasmania. The plan for the site were guided by Robinson's 'General Plan' from 1829, and aimed to 'ameliorate' Tasmanian Aboriginal people through the principles of civilisation and Christianity. The general idea was to create a small village where Aboriginal people would live together as Christian peasants. The village would include a mission house, separate huts for single and married people on fenced allotments, a school that also served as a church, and a number of gardens. Aboriginal people would simultaneously be trained in 'habits of industry' through building their own huts and gardens and cooking food in a European way. They would also learn Christianity through worship and be educated in schools in the English language (Haebich 2000, p. 76).

By 1847 when Wybalenna closed after years of mismanagement by Dr Jeanneret, the surviving forty-six Aboriginal people were moved to Oyster Cove on the Tasmanian mainland. The chosen site had previously been a female penitentiary and was thought to be more economical to service because of its relative proximity to Hobart. Governor Denison ordered the immediate removal of all children to the Orphan School in Hobart or into 'supervised' employment (Haebich 2000, p. 122).

Kidnapping of Indigenous children by settlers for domestic and farm labour was widespread, causing one Governor to express his 'utter indignation and abhorrence' at the practice. In 1819, another Governor, Sorrell, made a similar proclamation. He also ordered officials to list all children and youth held by settlers. Those children removed without parental consent were sent to Hobart, where they were educated and housed.

The situation worsened as the 1820s brought an influx of European settlers who quickly took up land. Indigenous resistance hardened, and the colony fell into a state of panic as attacks and murders became more frequent. Governor Arthur responded by declaring martial law. This period of conflict came to be known as the 'Black War'.

After a spate of attacks on settlers in 1830, Colonel George Arthur decided "to deliver the knock-out blow that would bring the conflict to an end once and for all". It was known as the 'Black Line'. Over 2 000 men were recruited and spread out in a line across the north of Tasmania. For six weeks they moved southward with the aim of driving the Indigenous population onto two peninsulas in the far south-east. The plan was an utter failure.

## New South Wales

The arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay in 1788 and marked the beginning of European settlement and a long history of conflict between Aboriginal people and colonists. The very earliest contact between Aboriginal people and the settlers included episodes of violence, but also a genuine interest in learning about two different cultures (see, for example, Clendinnen 2005; Nugent 2005). Nevertheless the new arrivals failed to recognise or respect the Aboriginal peoples' relationship or rights to land. The

process of creating the settlement necessarily displaced Aboriginal people from their land creating conflict between Aboriginal groups and precipitating acts of retaliation against the settlers. By 1799 there were significant conflicts around the Hawkesbury and Parramatta, and marked the beginning of a six year period of 'Black Wars'.

The British Government had called for the fair and equal treatment of indigenous peoples in its colonies. It became necessary for the government to take some responsibility. This became equated with a process of 'civilising' Aboriginal people through a process of education and conversion to Christianity. In 1814 the colonial government of New South Wales, under Governor Macquarie, established the first Aboriginal school, the 'Native Institution' at Parramatta. The school was unsuccessful and closed in 1820.

It was not until 1883 that the Aborigines Protection Board was established in New South Wales to manage a system of reserves and control the movement of Aboriginal people. The Board was responsible for the administration of the later Aborigines Protection Act 1909 which included wide ranging powers over the lives of Aboriginal people, including the power to remove children from families. The Board was renamed the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1940 with the introduction of the new Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act. The Aborigines Welfare Board was abolished under the Aborigines Act (NSW) 1969.[1]

## South Australia

The colonies of southern Australia were proclaimed in 1834, and the Board of Colonization Commissioners had the power to declare all land as public land available for purchase by British subjects. Early Humanitarian groups protested. In April 1835 the Colonial Secretary Charles Grant who later became Lord Glenelg, requested that the rights of Aboriginal people be protected. The Colonial Office wished to limit the purchase of land to those areas which could be shown to be unoccupied. Glenelg further suggested the need for a 'Protector of Aborigines' and a scheme for the purchase of Aboriginal land. Despite these early good intentions, the Colonization Commissioners were determined to protect the colonial economy. While they agreed to protect Aborigines from violence and to provide subsistence, shelter, education and Christian teaching, they took steps to ensure that all land was available for sale regardless of Aboriginal ownership and occupation (Summers 1986b, pp. 284-85). In contradiction with Lord Glenelg's wish to protect existing rights of Aboriginal people, the emphasis of the officials was on equality under British law. This together with the creation of native schools and Christian indoctrination was held to have a 'civilising' effect that would see Aboriginal people entitled to the same rights as British subjects. (Summers 1986b, p. 287). The belief was therefore that Aboriginal people should abandon their culture and take their place as industrial labourers.

Summers (1986b) suggests that race relations were nevertheless reasonable amicable in the early colony. He attributes this to a confluence of factors including the orderly nature of the colony, the absence of convicts and the early depopulation of the region through diseases like smallpox. In these early years Aborigines camped around Adelaide and supplemented their traditional resources with colonial goods. Apart from the provision of blankets and rations, little official intervention took place. George Augustus Robinson was initially offered the position of Protector but later declined the offer. Three interim Protectors were appointed to fill the position before Matthew Moorhouse took it up in June 1839 (Summers 1986b, p. 288). By this time it was apparent that Aboriginal-settler relations would not



remain harmonious. Increasingly settlers from Melbourne and Sydney disturbed Aboriginal life and the spread of farming and pastoral activity displaced Aboriginal people and deprived them of a livelihood. In April 1839 a shepherd was speared seven miles from Adelaide on the Torrens. The governor ordered that all food and supplies be withheld from Aboriginal people until the offender was given up. But later that month three other shepherds were speared and public concern intensified. The Protector was criticised for failing to control the Aborigines.

Conflict in the colony began to rise. In July 1830 the *Maria* was shipwrecked on the Coorong and twenty-six survivors were massacred by Milmenrura people. Despite a ruling by Judge Cooper that the Aboriginal people were outside British Law, Commissioner Major O'Halloran authorised a subsequent investigation and two Aboriginal men were hanged on the site (Summers 1986b, pp. 291-92). In 1841 reports of an attack on an overland party near the Rufus River, inside the New South Wales border, led a police party to the Murray. This party was recalled by Governor Captain George Grey and a private expedition of fourteen colonists decided to settle the situation themselves. A skirmish resulted in one settler being wounded and five Aborigines killed (Summers 1986b, p. 292). A number of other incidents occurred in the region in the following months. Governor Grey dispatched a party including the Police Commissioner and the Protector of Aborigines to seek a lawful solution. Grey urged for restraint and Moorhouse was instructed to establish friendly relations with Aboriginal people. Nevertheless Moorhouse's party encountered a group of 300 Aborigines and the resulting exchange led to the killing of at least five Aborigines and wounding of another ten. A further conflict led to more than thirty Aborigines being killed. Moorhouse claimed to have acted in self-defence. Not all agreed, and a local newspaper reported that:

‘It is very plain that Mr. Moorhouse cannot act as Protector, for it was under his protection they were shot down by dozens, and by his own showing, before they had thrown a spear or committed a single offensive act in his presence’.

(Register, 18 September 1841, quoted in Summers 1986b, p. 293).

Moorhouse, nevertheless recognised in his report to Grey that the hostilities had been provoked by the treatment of Aboriginal women by settlers (Summers 1986b, pp. 293-94).

These were the first notable conflicts between settlers and Aborigines in South Australia, but the occurrences increased as the settlement expanded beyond Adelaide. Over the next ten years a number of attacks on settler property occurred intermittently in the Eyre Peninsula region and around Port Lincoln. No large scale operations were mounted against Aborigines but settlers and police operated their own punitive expeditions. The missionary Schurmann complained about the rising atrocities committed by these parties. Violence on the southeast frontier lasted from 1843 to 1848 and was centred on those who claimed land rather than transitory explorers and overlanders. The clashes were also seasonal as Aboriginal people moved between summer and winter lands. Poisoning and other killings were underreported (Summers 1986b, pp. 294-95).

After the Rufus River incident, the governor developed a plan to pacify Aboriginal people of the Murray district through a system of rations. A ration depot and government station was established at Moorundie in 1841. Edward Eyre was the administrator instructed to issue flour in return for a cessation of attacks on settlers. Aboriginal people were also offered additional earnings in return for labour. The scheme was thought to be successful and when Eyre departed in 1844 he reported that there had been no attacks on Europeans and that the district was ‘peaceful and orderly’. A similar arrangement was attempted at Port Lincoln on the Eyre peninsula but this was less successful with attacks continuing especially in the lean seasons. The model was used widely nevertheless and by 1860 there were fourteen

rations stations in operation, and by 1867 there were 61 in operation with 48 in existence at the turn of the century. They functioned to draw Aboriginal people away from disputed land. They also created a level of dependence that allowed authorities to exercise strong control over Aboriginal people through the distribution or withholding of food. These depots later became an essential element in the administration of segregation and protection policies (Summers 1986b, pp. 300-1).

While the frontier regions continued to be violent, the Aboriginal people living in Adelaide had suffered increasing degradation and were forced to beg and live off charity. A newspaper, the *Southern Australian*, suggested that the Aboriginal people were entitled to 'civilization food, and protection' (cited in Summers 1986b, p. 295) and appealed to the Protector and other officials to meet these aims. The initial plan had been that through education, Christianity and British justice, Aborigines would be civilised and take up a rightful place in settler society. As in other parts of Australia, these objectives rested on an assumption that Aboriginal people would recognise the benefits of such a change and would willingly cooperate. And it relied on settler society welcoming and accepting Aboriginal people. The policies were therefore undermined by both a lack of interest from Aboriginal people and settler unwillingness to afford Aboriginal people equality of political, social and economic equality (Summers 1986b, pp. 295-96).

Earlier, an Aboriginal reserve known as the Native Location was established on the northern side of the Torrens in 1838. Two Lutheran missionaries, C.G. Teichelmann and C.W. Schurmann, arrived at the mission to teach religion and secular studies in the local Aboriginal language. They studied the Kaurna language and in 1839 gained the approval of the Protector to teach in the language when Schurmann was appointed teacher at the school for Aboriginal children at the Native Location. The two missionaries published a grammar and vocabulary of the Kaurna in 1840. However, settlers were critical of the approach and saw the school as a waste of time. The Protector had concerns about the attendance rates and the lack of parental cooperation. Moorhouse wished to induce attendance through the distribution of food and clothing but was undermined by settlers who paid Aboriginal people with food in return for tasks. The school was generally thought to be unsuccessful in 'domesticating' Aboriginal children, and while they had learnt to read and write, they had not taken up trades. The problem according to the Protector Moorhouse was the influence of parents. In 1840 he suggested that removing children from parental influence result in greater success. He also suggested that marrying Aboriginal girls to suitable partners would prevent them from returning to their tribes. Neither suggestion was immediately acted upon. In 1842 children from the Murray area were brought to the school, but the inter-group friction reduced attendance further. In 1843 the school became a boarding school in an effort to limit the influence of parents. Public criticism eventually led to the abandonment of the Dresden Missionary Society philosophy and more practical subjects were introduced in 1844. The School continued to be irregularly attended and in 1852 most of the children were sent to Poonindie, an Anglican mission at Port Lincoln (Summers 1986b, pp. 296-99).

As Summers (1986b, p. 298) notes 'Schools could try to reshape Aborigines to make them more acceptable to the Europeans but they were completely powerless to change the attitudes of Europeans'. The continued rejection of Aboriginal people by settler society ensured that they were excluded from the economy. Aboriginal people seldom remained in employment and the Protector was disappointed by this pattern. However, Governor Grey recognised that the cause of failure was largely the attitude of settler society who excluded Aboriginal people. Settlers were also criticised of giving Aboriginal people 'handouts' and payments for tasks, and exchanging women for food, tobacco and alcohol. But Aboriginal people were primarily employed in temporary seasonal work and Aboriginal labour was generally in higher demand on the frontier. Pastoralists relied on Aboriginal knowledge of the bush to track stock. However as immigration increased Aboriginal workers were displaced by white labour and in settled

districts very few managed to find regular work. The Victorian Goldrush of the 1850s created a short-term surfeit of labour and Aboriginal people were employed in greater numbers during this time. This was encouraged or forced by the reduction in food rations as a deliberate means of encouraging Aboriginal people to take jobs left vacant by the gold rush. However, the white people returned to displace Aboriginal people from employment by the end of the 1850s and despite low wages and good reports on their work, few found work away from frontier pastoral districts (Summers 1986b, pp. 299-300).

The Protector Matthew Moorhouse became disillusioned with early attempts to use education and Christianity as a means of assimilating Aboriginal people into settler society. He saw that the impacts of settlement had been disastrous for Aboriginal people with many killed by conflict or disease. By 1856 he estimated that the Aboriginal population had declined from 650 to 180 in the Adelaide area. Mortality was much greater in other areas. Moorhouse became convinced that not only should Aboriginal children be removed from their parents but that all Aborigines should be segregated from settler society to protect them from the undesirable influences (Summers 1986b, p. 302). However, Governor Grey was committed to civilising Aboriginal people through 'persistent contact and interaction' with the settlers. His principle objective was to create and maintain a demand for Aboriginal labour and to ensure that the law would both protect Aboriginal people in relation to settler society and remove them from their own laws and customs (Summers 1986b, p. 302). However, equal laws did not apply to Aboriginal and settler people. In 1837 the colony placed a prohibition on supplying Aboriginal people with alcohol and in 1844 the first piece of legislation directly aimed at Aboriginal people was enacted. Ordinance No. 12 made provision for the Protector to become the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children of mixed descent and other Aboriginal children regarded as 'unprotected'. It also provided a system of indentured labour through an apprenticeship system. This law was a forerunner for later social legislation and deprived Aborigines of autonomy and legal rights. This remained the only piece of legislation for Aboriginal people until the end of the nineteenth century (Summers 1986b, pp. 303-4).

The Protector, missionaries, police and other officials were able to direct, control and regulate Aboriginal people even without formal legal authority. The people who had greatest power over Aboriginal people or responsibility for providing protection were frequently those who disregarded their rights. Aboriginal people were dependent on ration stations, missions and the Protector in a society that excluded them. In 1850 Archdeacon Hale proposed the establishment of a Native training Institution at Port Lincoln. The purpose of the Institution was to separate Aboriginal children who had been brought up in the Adelaide school from both the settler population and the 'wild portion of the blacks'. They were to be provided with regular Christian instruction and to be lead into industry and a settled mode of life. This scheme marked a shift away from the earlier policies of integration. It had the support of the Protector and the Anglican Church and was eventually approved by the governor. The initial concept was to ensure complete isolation and an island site was first identified. However a lack of water saw the eventual settlement 9 miles north of Port Lincoln. Children were initially brought from the Adelaide school as well as married couples from Adelaide. Local Aboriginal people were excluded from attending. The Institution initially had financial problems but Hale was satisfied with the progress in agricultural activities and adherence to the strict work routine. Almost half the population died in the six years from 1856 and only 3 children were born in the same period. The institution also struggled to maintain complete segregation. As the settlement expanded the isolation diminished and Port Lincoln Aborigines were taken in. The farm flourished and by 1870 was entirely self-sufficient with wheat and wool from the property attracting high prices. The enterprise was not only out of debt but able to fund missionary activities in other parts of the colony. Despite the successes, some observers noted that the Aboriginal people appeared a little joyless (Summers 1986b, p. 305).

However for the most part, responsibility for Aboriginal people in South Australia was left to missions in the second half of the nineteenth century. The position of Protector was abolished in 1856 when responsibility for Aboriginal people was transferred to the Minister for Crown Lands. While the position was re-established after the Legislative Council Select Committee Report in 1860, the government was dominated by pastoral interests and largely absolved itself of any responsibility for Aboriginal welfare. With the exception of ration distribution, missions became the principle agencies to deal with Aborigines. In 1858 The Aborigines Friends Association was established. This protestant missionary group was committed to the 'moral, spiritual and physical well-being' of Aboriginal people in South Australia. In 1859 they established the Point McLeay Mission on Lake Alexandrina. Eight years later German missions were established at Kopperamanna and Killalpaninna in the desert east of Lake Eyre, and in 1868 Point Pearce Mission was set up on Yorke Peninsula. These missions further fuelled segregationist practices. The older Aboriginal people proved particularly resilient to Christian indoctrination and children were removed from their influence by being housed in dormitories. Many aspects of Aboriginal culture and society were deliberately destroyed. Aboriginal people were institutionalised and their lives managed. The missionaries were barely successful in spite of these extreme measures. They were also unsuccessful in ensuring the well-being of Aboriginal people with high mortality rates common on missions. For many Aboriginal people, however, the missions remained a sanctuary from the uncertainty of living on the margins of settler society (Summers 1986b, pp. 304-6).

Despite the success of Poonindie, it attracted criticism from settlers who wanted to have the land resumed and divided for settler blocks. The main source of the grievance was that the mission occupied quality farming land and that the mission should be relocated to less productive land. A number of governments resisted the pressure to close Poonindie following the agitation in 1870. However the trustees eventually agreed in 1892, and two years later Poonindie was closed without provision for residents, including those who had always lived there (Summers 1986b, p. 306).

The other missions continued to operate and the number of missions expanded under the Protestant missionary societies in the twentieth century. Point Pearce and Point McLeay transferred to government control during World War I but essentially retained the same characteristics as the Christian missions. The early missions provided a model for later Aboriginal institutions. Locations were often on unproductive land in areas with few employment opportunities. Land reserved for Aboriginal people was generally out of the way and in areas initially unattractive to settlers. The missions were an important part of implementing policies of protection and segregation which emerged in the 1840s and continued for more than a century. In the 1961 census 40 percent of the Aboriginal population of South Australia was living in settlements and missions, institutions in which they had few rights and were subjected to direction of a supervisor (Summers 1986b, pp. 306-7). The relationship between white controllers and the Aboriginal inmates was one of subservience and dependence.

For the most part the policies of segregation and protection were predicated on the observation of the Select Committee that Aboriginal people were doomed to extinction and that 'all evidence goes to prove that they have lost much, and gained little or nothing by their contact with Europeans' (Summers 1986b, p. 308). By the end of the beginning of the twentieth century Aboriginal people were by far the poorest group in South Australia (Summers 1986a). There was a growing concern that Aboriginal people required greater protection than that offered by the missions.

In 1911 *The Aborigines Act 1911* was passed. This legislation made provision for the protection and control of Aboriginal and 'half-caste' peoples in South Australia. It created a system of reserves on which supervisory institutions were to be established. The reserves were intended to segregate Aboriginal people from wider society in the interests of 'protection'. It was thought that Aboriginal people could

be supervised and tutored. The act gave wide ranging powers to the Chief Protector and a newly created Aborigines Department. Under the Act, Aboriginal people's movements could be directed. They could be asked to remain on, or move to, a reserve or institution or from their camps. Particular towns and municipalities could be declared prohibited areas and Aborigines could be confined in separate locked hospitals. Significantly, the Act made the Protector the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and 'half-caste' child until the age of 21 years, regardless of whether that child had living relatives. The Protector was further empowered to manage the property of Aboriginal people. It became an offence for non-Aboriginal people to enter reserves without permission. Although designed to protect Aboriginal people from external exploitation, the rules also served to protect administrators from external scrutiny (Summers 1986a, pp. 488-89).

It was not only the Protector who gained extraordinary powers under the act. Superintendents of Reserves were given discretionary powers to impose severe restrictions on Aborigines. The legislation rested on a belief that Aboriginal people were inferior and incapable and in need of protection and supervision. However, the act made no provision for the economic protection of Aboriginal people, and even fostered the exploitation by employers in as much as it made no provisions for minimum conditions or wages (Summers 1986a, p. 489).

The legal provisions had little impact in remote areas where the Protector had limited access and it was difficult to enforce any laws to protect Aboriginal people from exploitation (Summers 1986a, pp. 490-91). This was particularly the case in the northern colonies which SA gained control over in 1863, and which only became the Northern Territory in 1911 when it was transferred to Commonwealth control. Despite this separation, South Australia continued to administer Aboriginal affairs. Public debate continued on the question of Aboriginal welfare. The missions were suffering significant financial difficulties. These factors placed increasing pressure on the government to take greater responsibility and in 1913 a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate the control, organisation and management of mission stations.

The Chief Protector made a number of criticisms of the missions, citing complaints from Aboriginal people. He suggested that the missions had created a dependency which left many Aboriginal people unemployed and untrained. He further questioned whether they showed adequate concern for Aboriginal people in their care, especially the aged and infirm. Significantly the Commission found that the number of people who came within the scope of the Aborigines Act had in fact increased, despite the anticipated decline in the Aboriginal population. This was due to the rapid growth of mixed descent Aboriginal people and the Commission concluded that Aboriginal people no longer required protection. Rather, it suggested that protection should be replaced by assistance and training for Aboriginal people to become useful members of the community (Hall 1997; Summers 1986a). Evidence given to the Commission suggested that education and training had been frustrated by the distraction of Aboriginal groups. In particular it was thought that 'half-castes' 'have all the black fellows' habits' when living with Aboriginal people. Hence the Commission recommended the separation of 'half-caste' people as an important transition from charity to self-support and from protection to assimilation and suggested that children be removed from their parents to vocational training institutions. Most recommendations, were not acted on, but Hall (1997) suggests this was a turning point in Aboriginal affairs in South Australia that foreshadowed major changes in policy direction.

## Northern Territory

## Western Australia

## Assimilation

### South Australia

The Royal Commission of 1913 had recommended more direct control by the Government and in 1915 Point Pearce became a Government Station and Point McLeay followed the following year (Summers 1986a). Nevertheless the missions continued to play an important role and there was even a resurgence of missionary activity in the 1920s and 1930s. Six new missions were established by the United Aborigines Missions in the remote part of the state. Their activities were aligned with protectionist policies of segregating Aboriginal people from wider society. In some instances this provided physical protection, but the cultural destruction that accompanied missionary activities was often deliberate and extreme (Summers 1986a). By the 1930s, however, there was increasing pressure for the government to adopt assimilation as its primary policy. At the first Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities in 1937 which agreed to a new assimilation policy, the South Australian representatives were strong supporters of a national policy (Summers 1986a, pp. 492-3). Despite this support, the South Australian government did not implement legislation to this effect. Rather the *Aborigines Act 1934-39* further diminished Aboriginal rights and was more paternalistic and restrictive than the 1911 Act. The legislation established the Aborigines Department and the Aborigines Protection Board which replaced the Chief Protector. The definition of 'Aborigines' was expanded to include anyone of Aboriginal descent and thus brought more people rather than fewer under control of the state. Further controls were placed on relationships and marriages between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The 1939 amendment introduced a system of exemptions in which authorities could deem an Aboriginal person to be non-Aboriginal on the basis of a judgement on 'character and standard of intelligence and development'. The system was highly divisive, conferring rights on some Aboriginal people that were denied to others. The system was largely criticised by Aborigines who referred to the exemption certificates as 'dog licences'. The exemptions also provided new means to intervene and control Aboriginal lives. As had been seen previously too, these kinds of official measures to adopt Aboriginal people into wider society met with continued opposition in practice. All Aboriginal people, whether fair skinned or not, faced discrimination in every facet of everyday lives, and were segregated or excluded in recreation, social activities, schools and church. When the definition of an Aboriginal person expanded in 1934, the few individuals who had gained a level of acceptance and autonomy became subjected to the law. This further restricted their participation in society (Summers 1986a).

The government policy of assimilation continued to be strengthened through the 1930s and 1940s. This was given impetus by the labour shortages created by World War II and Aboriginal workers were employed in increased numbers within the non-Aboriginal community. Many of these people were displaced at the end of the war. However, there was a steady increase in the number of Aboriginal people leaving reserves to live in cities and by the 1961 Conference of State and Commonwealth Ministers of Aboriginal Affairs there was agreement that the policy of assimilation would ensure that

Aboriginal people would eventually gain the same lifestyle as other Australians, including adoption of language, beliefs, customs and loyalties.

In 1962 the segregationist and restrictive *Aborigines Act 1934-1939* was finally repealed (Summers 1986a, p. 495). The Liberal Country League government introduced an Aboriginal Affairs Bill, which it claimed would remove all restrictions on Aboriginal people. However, the Australian Labor Party under the leadership of Bill Dunstan, introduced a number of amendments. Summers (1986a, pp. 495-96) notes that the parliamentary discussions were unusually cooperative. The amendments that were adopted included a reduction of control over Aboriginal property and the confinement of people on reserves. The amendments further ensured that Aboriginal reserves could only be abolished by a parliamentary act. Despite this, a number of amendments were rejected, including a proposal to remove the distinction between Aboriginal people of full and mixed descent; and the provision to ensure Aboriginal membership of the Aboriginal Affairs Board. As a consequence a number of restrictions on Aboriginal people remained in place. These were notable in relation to the education and training of Aboriginal people and their children, health inspections and control of reserves. Aboriginal reserves continued to operate as closed institutions in which the Superintendent had far-reaching powers (Summers 1986a).

The 1962 act was intended to implement the national assimilation policy in South Australia. The assimilationist policy assumed that all people could be included in a homogenous culture and society. However, the requirement for Aboriginal people to abandon their beliefs, kinship networks and identity would mean that Aboriginal people would 'disappear' into the dominant society. There was a growing realisation that this was problematic and not dissimilar to earlier attempts to make Aboriginal people 'disappear'. From 1962 until 1965 the term 'integration' was introduced to suggest that Aboriginal people could be included into wider society but still choose to maintain features of their own culture, and heralded a new phase in Aboriginal history that moved towards self-determination (Summers 1986a, pp. 496-97).

## **The Narratives**

Patterns and interests identified by Baulch e.g. continuity of cultures, etc?

## **Experiences**

## **Effects**

## **The Narrative Framework**

‘Battle for the Children’s Minds’ (Rowley 1970, p. 59)



## **Locating Histories and Narratives**

### **Places and the spaces in between**

#### **Patterns in Space**

The implementation of Robinson's plan at Wybalenna foreshadowed and directly influenced the development of Aboriginal missions and government settlements on the Australian mainland during the twentieth century (Haebich 2000).

- See notes on regional/thematic patterns.

**Places of Segregation**

## **Places of Assimilation**

## Exemplary Places

### Protection

#### Wybalenna

The implementation of Robinson's plan at Wybalenna foreshadowed and directly influenced the development of Aboriginal missions and government settlements on the Australian mainland during the twentieth century (Haebich 2000).

#### Cummeragunja

*By the turn of the century Cummeragunja reserve was a prosperous community, and by 1908 it became a neat village with 300 residents. Its communal farming was appreciated by local farmers who persuaded the Aborigines Protection Board to commit funds to expand farm production on the reserve. However, in 1915 the local farmers committee was abolished, and the Board took over. The Aborigines Protection Act 1909 empowered reserve managers to remove residents for misconduct or because it was believed they should be earning their living elsewhere. Soon, the police started to remove 'half-caste' children to the Board's training institutions. Many families responded by fleeing across the Murray to Victoria to live in riverbank camps. On 6 February 1938 about 170 residents walked off the mission in protest of the way they were treated by the Manager, and crossed the river to settle in Victoria. Some of the women were especially vocal, including Margaret Tucker, Geraldine Briggs and others.*

*In 1953, Cummeragunja was closed as a station and reduced to reserve status. Despite the Board's assimilation policies, the few remaining residents agitated for the right to begin farming again. In 1965, the company Cummeragunga Pty Ltd was registered. On 9 March 1984 the title deeds for the former reserve passed to the Yorta Yorta people through the newly created Yorta Yorta Land Council. Today, many Aboriginal families reside on Cummeragunja. (National Foundation for Australian Women 2008)*

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